DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 611 CS 509 305

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TITLE Improving Deficient Listening Skills in the Language Arts Program at the Middle Grades.
PUB DATE 23 Apr 96
NOTE 52p.; M.A. Project, Saint Xavier University.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Masters Theses (042)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; Grade 7; Instructional Improvement; *Interpersonal Communication; Junior High Schools; Language Arts; *Listening Habits; *Listening Skills; Metacognition; Middle Schools; *Student Attitudes; Student Improvement
IDENTIFIERS *Active Listening; Illinois (Chicago Suburbs); *Listening Strategies

ABSTRACT

A project developed a program for improving deficient student-to-student listening skills. The targeted population consisted of 18 seventh-grade middle school students in a culturally diverse, lower middle class community in a near-western suburb of Chicago. The problem of deficient listening skills was evident through teacher observation and anecdotal records, student surveys, and low standardized listening test scores. Analysis of probable cause data revealed student apathy and passivity toward speakers' messages, noting that lack of trust leads to poor communication. Students displayed boredom and lack of motivation within the classroom setting through passive listening. A review of solution strategies suggested by knowledgeable others and an analysis of the problem setting resulted in the selection of one intervention: an emphasis on social skills instruction attempted to increase positive social interaction and active listening skills. Results from post-intervention data indicated an increase in student use of active listening skills in dyads and cooperative group settings. Findings revealed that students used metacognition to monitor and check their personal listening skills. Findings also suggest that students gained a heightened awareness of the elements of active listening. (Various forms and lesson plans are appended; contains 28 references.) (Author/CR)

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ED 398 611

# IMPROVING DEFICIENT LISTENING SKILLS IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRAM AT THE MIDDLE GRADES

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & IRI / Skylight

Field-Based Master's Program

Action Research Project
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# ABSTRACT

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April 23, 1996

Title: Improving Deficient Listening Skills in the Language Arts Program at the Middle Grades

This report described a program for improving deficient student to student listening skills. The targeted population consisted of one seventh grade class at a middle school in a culturally diverse, lower middle class community located in a near western suburb of Chicago. The problem of deficient listening skills was evident through teacher observation and anecdotal records, student surveys, and low standardized listening test scores.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed student apathy and passivity toward speakers' messages. Lack of trust lead to poor communication. Also, students displayed boredom and lack of motivation within the classroom setting through passive listening.

A review of solution strategies suggested by knowledgeable others and an analysis of the problem setting resulted in the selection of one intervention. An emphasis on social skills instruction attempted to increase positive social interaction and active listening skills in the targeted seventh grade class.

Post intervention data indicated an increase in student use of active listening skills in dyads and cooperative group settings. Students gained a heightened awareness to the elements of active listening.

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Chapter 1

# PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

## General Statement of Problem

The students of the targeted seventh grade class exhibit deficient listening skills, which interfere with academic growth in the language arts program. Evidence for the existence of the problem includes teacher observation and anecdotal records, student surveys, and low standardized listening test scores.

## Immediate Problem Context

The targeted middle school is located in a western suburb of Chicago, Illinois, and the total enrollment of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders is 329. The 1994 School Report Card states the ethnic breakdown of this school population as: Black, 52.3 percent; White, 27.1 percent; Cuban-American, Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican, 14.3 percent; Asian/Pacific Islander, 5.2 percent; Native American, 1.2 percent.

Thirty-one percent of the students come from low-income families, defined as receiving public aid, residing in homes for neglected or delinquent children, living in foster homes, or receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Attendance rate at this middle school is 95.7 percent and student mobility is 14.9 percent (1994 School Report Card).

Within this school, 26 full-time teachers service the children at a pupil-teacher ratio of 17 : 1. There are 19 female and 7 male instructors who average 12 years experience within the education field. Their average salary is $33,153. Fifty-four percent of these teachers have a Bachelor's degree and forty-six percent possess at least a Master's degree. One faculty member is Black; the remaining 25 instructors are White (1994 School Report Card). Additional full-time employees include four teacher aides, one library aide, two office secretaries, one health aide, one social worker, one counselor, and one principal.

The middle school is a two story brick structure with full basement. There is one main office, one teacher workroom, two faculty lounges, one conference room, one cafeteria with kitchen, one gymnasium with two locker rooms, 21 classrooms, two science laboratories, one music laboratory, one band room, and one computer laboratory containing 29 Macintosh computers plus one instructor computer.

Each student possesses one hall locker with a combination lock. The children follow eight 41 minute periods per day: three periods of language arts and one period each of math, social studies, special (art, home management, computers, and music in nine week rotations), science, and physical education. The sixth graders work in self-contained classrooms whereas the seventh and eighth graders travel to five different teachers each day. There are four sixth

grade homerooms and five each at the seventh and eighth grades. These children are in heterogeneous groups at all levels with the exception of one accelerated math group and one Academics Plus group at both the seventh and eighth grade levels.

Twenty-six seventh and eighth graders occupy placement in the Academics Plus program. This program meets the special needs of regular education students who are at risk of dropping out of school, failing three of their five academic subjects, or displaying low self-esteem and / or accumulating excessive absences.

There are four cross categorical self-contained special education classrooms servicing 44 students: learning disabled, behavior disorder, educable mentally handicapped, severe educable mentally handicapped. In addition, 27 students receive special education resource services at this middle school. Additional special services include speech and language development, social work, counseling, and occupational therapy. This school also shares a psychologist with two district schools.

The language arts curriculum at this school includes reading, writing, and speaking. These components prove to be very important skills that teachers introduce and reinforce throughout the elementary and middle school years. Individual teacher instruction often incorporates these independent language arts skills into integrated lessons utilizing the literature based Houghton Mifflin reading series. Each language arts teacher compiles student portfolios as a sampling of student progress in the areas of reading, writing, grammar, spelling, handwriting, and speaking.

Teachers offer additional instruction in English, grammar, spelling, and creative writing through the use of Warriner and Laidlaw texts. The students receive a total of 123 minutes of language arts, and the curricular goals of these lessons are competent readers, polished writers, and effective speakers and listeners.

Surrounding Community

The district at large is under the administrative jurisdiction of seven elected school board members, superintendent, assistant superintendent, business manager, administrative assistant, and special services director. Excluding school board members, the average administrator salary is $60,775. The pupil-administrator ratio is 211.5 : 1 (1993 School Report Card).

Within this district, there is a total of 150 certified staff members working at four elementary schools grades kindergarten through five and two middle schools grades six through eight. The operating expenditure per pupil is $4,998, and the district services 2,000 students from six different communities (1994 School Report Card).

The target school in this district services families from three feeder neighborhoods. Community A has a total population of 20,241: 14, 352 Black, 4,817 White, 1,197 Cuban-American, Mexican-American, and Puerto Rican, 721 other race, 330 Asian or Pacific Islander, 21 Native American, Eskimo, or Aleut. Of persons 16 years and over, 7 percent are unemployed while 74 percent are in the labor force. The average per capita income is $13,325. Females with no husband present head one-fourth of family households in this community (United States Census, 1990).

Community B has a population of 5,137: 4,606 White, 304 Cuban-American, Mexican-American, or Puerto Rican, 231 Black, 221 Asian or Pacific Islander, 72 other race, 7 Native American, Eskimo, or Aleut. Of persons 16 years and over, 4 percent are unemployed, and 68 percent are active in the labor force. The average per capita income is $16,714. Females with no husband present head 12 percent of family households in this community (United States Census, 1990).

Community C has a total population of 7,602: 6,610 White, 482 Black, 440 Cuban-American, Mexican-American, or Puerto Rican, 374 Asian or Pacific Islander, 189 other race, 17 Native American, Eskimo, or Aleut. Sixty-eight percent of persons 16 years and over are in the labor force while four percent are unemployed. The average per capita income is $16,884. Females head 13 percent of family households with no husband present (United States Census, 1990).

Considering the target school's three feeder neighborhoods collectively, education attainment of persons 25 years and over includes: less than ninth grade 7.6 percent; ninth to twelfth grade, no diploma 15.1 percent; high school graduation 33.6 percent; some college, no degree 22.1 percent; Associate degree 7.6 percent; Bachelor's degree 10.6 percent; graduate or professional degree 3.3 percent (Census Profile, 1994).

Regional and National Context of Problem

Reading, writing, and speaking are the focus of school curriculum across the nation. Another skill is the cornerstone of language arts instruction. This communication skill is listening. Johnson (1951) defined listening as the ability to understand and effectively respond to communication. Allen, Brown, and

Yatkin (cited in Choates & Rakes, 1987) contended that school age children spend the greater portion of the day listening. Children at any grade level are expected to "pay attention" and listen.

Instructors cannot assume that a child's ability to listen comes naturally. Wolvin (cited in Fusco & Fountain, 1992) asserted that listening skills and thinking skills are difficult to differentiate, and good listeners need strategies for enhanced active involvement during listening.

Furthermore, Fusco and Fountain (1992) stated children need listening strategies to evaluate oneself as a listener and become cognizant of the power of one's listening. Students need to focus on their ability to listen, filter messages, and receive information. Effective listeners can monitor and evaluate their listening; therefore, listening becomes a metacognitive process.

Exposure to lesson and lecture presentation, oral reading, and the administration of directions require children to utilize their listening skills. Children are also expected to use social skills while listening to their peers. Listening is not an isolated school task; it is a skill needed for successful relationships in school, home, and work. We live in an interdependent society (Schniedewind & Davidson, 1987).

Researchers seek to find interrelationships between reading abilities and listening skills. To what extent do these capacities overlap? Is there an optimal time for children to learn listening strategies, and are these lessons effective when taught in isolation? How can deficient listening skills be improved in a middle school language arts program? What strides in listening can be made by the seventh graders at this target school?

Chapter 2

## PROBLEM EVIDENCE AND PROBABLE CAUSE

### Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent of deficient listening skills in the targeted seventh grade class, this researcher utilized these instruments to measure listening: standardized listening test scores, student surveys, and observation checklists. First, standardized listening test scores were reviewed. The students participated in the CTB/McGraw-Hill Listening Test, Level 3, on December 1, 1994. This test was 4 pages in length and contained 20 questions. Students marked answers in pencil on a computer grids.

Specifically, the students were introduced and guided through two sample questions. The entire test was read aloud by the instructor and students only saw the answer choices, not the test script or questions. Approximately 30 minutes was required for the instructor to read the 20 test questions and allow time for the student responses. The test was administered within the regular school schedule during the morning hours.

The first five questions required students to listen to directions and accurately draw their responses. Students were to compare their drawings to the answer choices and choose identical sketches. Students with inept visual-spatial intelligences may have suffered in this area even if they were attentive listeners. Questions 6, 7, and 8 required logical, sequential thought and careful

listening to determine patterns. Questions 9 and 10 assessed chronological order and listening aptitude while students studied blocks of four sketches. Finally, the last 10 questions required students to listen and comprehend short passages.

The seventh graders were randomly assigned to one homeroom and thus became the targeted group. Six are new to the district and did not take the December 1994 listening test. The 12 scores are recorded in Table 1.

Table 1

CTB McGraw-Hill Listening Test Raw Scores

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | 17/20 | G | 13/20 |
| B | 12/20 | H | 12/20 |
| C | 9/20 | I | 19/20 |
| D | 14/20 | J | 13/20 |
| E | 11/20 | K | 13/20 |
| F | 16/20 | L | 13/20 |

The mean score was 13. According to the examiner's manual, this average placed the students collectively at the 43 percentile rank in the nation. Several variables are involved in the test score reliability: students' nutrition and sleep habits, student apathy or motivation, and outside distractions.

The second instrument used to measure listening was a student survey. This additional documentation was made on September 7, 1995, to illustrate deficient listening skills of the targeted seventh graders. Students were asked to complete an anonymous survey questioning their personal attitudes and

judgments of listening skill and style (Appendix A). Since the first three questions were open-ended, several students supplied multi-part answers. The students completed the survey within 10 minutes.

Question 1 asked for a description of a good listener. The students responded the following: behaves quietly, 10; makes eye contact, 8; asks and answers questions, 4; makes sure of understanding, 3; hears carefully, 2; follows directions, 1; tries not to be distracted, 1; folds hands, 1; takes notes, 1; nods head. Half the children believed sitting quietly and listening were synonymous, and one third recognized eye contact as appropriate body language.

The second question asked for a description of the ways in which a poor listener pays attention and behaves. Responses included: no eye contact, 5; rude behavior, 4; distracted, 4; talks inappropriately, 4; does not respond or cannot answer questions, 2. Individual students included these answers: head down on desk, hands not folded, interrupts speaker, tapping pencil on desk, reading something else, does not follow directions, and does not understand.

Quite interestingly, five students mentioned lack of eye contact as a negative behavior, but only one recorded eye contact as a positive attribute of good listeners. The responses for question two were much more diverse than question one. Seven of the thirteen answers dealt with inappropriate body language.

Question three of the student survey asked students how they knew their message was heard and understood in a conversation. Responses included: the person answers back, 8; asks questions, 5; looks at me, 5; does not squint, 1; sits still, 1; claps, 1; nods head, 1; repeats what is said, 1; follows my directions, 1.

The majority of the students recognized the importance of asking clarifying questions and responding during a conversation. Out of the three open-ended questions, this third question prompted the least variety of answers. This researcher hypothesizes that the students understand that good listeners are capable of interacting with the speaker and asking clarifying questions.

Finally, students were asked to rank themselves on a number scale from one to five. As one being the poorest and five being the strongest, students were to select one number that ranked their personal listening aptitude. Overall, the class average score was four--above average listener. This contradicts their performance level on the standardized listening test. This ranking also contradicts the class performance within the school setting. For example, the targeted students continually ask for directions to be repeated throughout the regular school day. Directions are constantly repeated by the instructors. The students believe they are better listeners than what reality dictates.

Finally, a teacher checklist was utilized on September 8-12, 1995, to document five active listening skills as displayed during conversations of student dyads: nodding the head, eye contact with speaker, appropriate body language, asking clarifying questions, and paraphrasing (Appendix B). In detail, students were paired off and given three minutes each to relay a narrative story about the best teacher they had ever had. Listening scores were ranked on a continuum from one to five. Class averages were recorded: nodding the head, 2.1; eye contact with speaker, 2.6; appropriate body language, 2.3; asking clarifying questions, 1.3; perephrasing, 1.0.

Even though students seemed somewhat aware of proper listening skills as displayed in the student survey questions, few actually demonstrated the use of these skills in student dyads. They are capable of understanding the basic skills, yet putting them to practical use does not come naturally for the children.

Probable Causes

Why are listening skills deficient in the targeted seventh grade? Even though students seem somewhat cognizant of basic listening skills, why are they not demonstrating overt use of the skills, and why are standardized test scores below the 50 percentile?

Students spend over half the school day listening, yet they do it ineffectively (Brent & Anderson, 1994). Lounsbury (1991) claimed students spend over 90 percent of the school day speaking and listening. At any rate, most researchers agree that listening does not come naturally but must be taught. Maturation alone does not guarantee or warrant developed listening skills. "No effective alternate or substitute exists to compensate for ineffective listening skills" (Quible, 1989, p. 19).

First, students need direct instruction in the area of listening. In the adult society, most people function at no better than 25 percent listening efficiency (Brent & Anderson, 1994). Many factors contribute to this low functioning level. Both environmental and mental distractions can affect listening aptitude at any age level. Environmental distractions include noises and interruptions, whereas mental distractions may include one, two, or all of the following: fatigue, preoccupation, and inaccurate predictions of the message of the speaker before completion (Quible, 1985).

Second, another probable cause of poor listening skills may be reflected in the internal conflicts of vulnerable adolescents. This is an age of developmental diversity as middle school students may fall within one of four phases. Some are still in late childhood, others are preadolescent, some are emerging adolescents, and still others are early adolescents (Alexander, 1981). These middle school students, or transescents, (Alexander, 1981, Clark & Starr, 1991) are coming to terms with the demands and responsibilities of adult life while their physical growth is fast paced yet sporadic. "For them, schools are likely to be sources of frustration, failure, humiliation, and punishment, as well as presenting opportunities for social growth, pleasure, learning skills and knowledge, and gaining experience in the art of becoming an adult" (Clark & Starr, 1991, p. 23).

Third, faults within the instructional strategies at the middle school level may also be detrimental to listening skill acquisition. There are four ways of structuring classrooms, yet 95% of the teachers at this targeted school regularly use only one type --individual. The other three strategies are competitive, small groups, and cooperative learning groups. According to Rottier and Ogan (1991), each method of instruction should be utilized to offer a well-rounded educational experience for all children. Furthermore, the various academic content areas dictate the best suited method of instruction. Herein lies the professional choice of the teacher in curriculum implementation (Rottier & Ogan, 1991).

Taking a closer look at these ways of structuring classrooms, individual instruction involves independent work which is graded in isolation on its own merit and not compared to other students and their scores. No listening takes place among classmates. Second, competitive instruction divides the class into

winners and losers, with the bulk of the class falling in the middle (Rottier & Ogan, 1991). According to Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1988), students within a competitive environment seek positive outcomes for self and negative outcomes for others. Either students work hard to beat others, or the students relax and take a nonchalant approach to work since they know they have already lost. Once again, listening skills are not utilized in this setting.

Third, small groups are student selected teams. Rottier and Ogan (1991) proposed four outcomes of small groups: the group may successfully finish the work, the group gets together yet one dominant student completes the task while others copy, the group merely sits in close proximity while all members work independently, or the group socializes. Students are typically only required to listen to the answers supplied by peers. Listening mastery is not fostered.

Last, cooperative groups promote team learning and listening. Even though cooperative groups enforce positive interdependence, bonding, and accountability, only 7 to 20 percent of class activities utilize team learning (Johnson et al., 1988). Teachers often shy away from cooperative learning due to misconceptions. Many educators believe cooperative groups are unproductive, disruptive, and predicable because some dominant personalities may monopolize and control groups (Dishon & O'Leary Wilson, 1984).

Teachers must receive ongoing formal training on cooperative learning for successful implementation. At this target school, instructors are merely introduced to the basic concepts of cooperative learning during one teacher institute day. Only one teacher in this school uses cooperative learning as a regular classroom structure.

Finally, there is a lack of listening skills instruction and study skills strategies within the school curriculum. "...of all areas of study skills, those associated with listening are, in many ways, primary" (Devine, cited in Clark & Starr, 1991, p. 300). Key listening skills need to be mastered: active listening with a purpose, note-taking, recognizing main ideas, following time order, paraphrasing and memorizing, relating, critiquing and evaluation, and using new knowledge, information, and ideas (Clark & Starr, 1991). Unfortunately, teachers receive minimal or no training regarding how to teach the art of listening to their students (Funk & Funk, 1989). It's of little wonder that teachers often feel inept at teaching listening strategies to children.

This action researcher cites the following conditions as probable causes for deficient listening skills in the targeted seventh grade class: the unrealistic self-evaluation of true listening skills and aptitude, the absence of formal listening lessons and study skills instruction within the district curriculum, the tumultuous conflicts of adolescent years, the poor class structure focusing on individual and competitive work completion, and the lack of formal teacher training in the area of listening and study skills instruction.

## Chapter 3

## THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

### Review of the Literature

Why is listening such a critical skill? How is listening defined? Can listening be taught? How does cooperative learning foster listening? Herein lies the review of literature as this researcher addresses the problem of deficient listening of the targeted seventh graders.

First, Devine (1978) posited that students need to be critical listeners as they are bombarded with opinions, beliefs, and thoughts of speakers within one democratic society, many whom are misleading and corrupt yet all are still protected by equal rights and freedom of speech. Many speakers have polished their oratorical style yet listeners have not developed their critical listening skills. "It is in their listening that people are most vulnerable" (Devine, 1978, p. 299). Herein lies the purpose and necessity of listening instruction for school children.

How is listening defined? Even though much research has been conducted throughout the century, only general definitions have emerged, none which are readily accepted by all scientists and educators (Devine, 1978). One

definition has recently emerged. Lundsteen (cited in Devine, 1978, p. 297) proposed this definition: "Listening is the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind."

Can listening be taught? Much debate encompasses the definition and measurement of listening; however, researchers agree that evidence indicates that listening instruction can be successful (Devine, 1978). Furthermore, Jalongo (cited in Brent & Anderson, 1993) asserted children can become better listeners when explicit lessons incorporate these skills: predicting, following directions, inferring, and analyzing material with a critical eye. Moreover, listening is a skill that is situational and requires a variety of strategic repertoires. Students need a purpose for listening.

Brent and Anderson (1993) proposed the whole language classroom to be the optimal environment for integrating listening lessons into the curriculum. Teachers need to model good listening, teach listening skills, and provide a purpose in meaningful applications outside the classroom. To improve listening, students and their real worlds need this connection with the school setting.

The whole language philosophy gives teachers the opportunity to incorporate listening lessons into an already packed curriculum. Its systematic approach to listening instruction affords the teacher the direct challenge of meeting the needs of diverse students (Spiegel, cited in Brent & Anderson, 1993). Furthermore, active listening is required from students during class discussions, one-on-one conferences, book talks, author's chair, cooperative groups, and reader's theater (Brent & Anderson, 1994).

McCabe and Rhoades (1988) delineated specific techniques for direct instruction of listening to school age children. Teachers must teach, discuss,

and model these two techniques. First, the listener must focus on the speaker while making a concerted effort to hear and understand the message. Second, the listener must use metacognition to question one's comprehension during the communication process. Clarifying is feedback in the form of asking questions, paraphrasing, and checking perceptions. Checking perceptions requires the receiver to listen between the lines and understand the emotions of the speaker. This step lends itself to nonverbal interpretation. These listening skill activities teach responsibility for good speaking and attentive listening for successful communication. Children must be taught individual accountability within the communication process which relies upon practice and feedback (McCabe & Rhoades, 1986).

Since metacognition plays an important role in listening, one might question the relationship between listening skills and reading achievement. Does good listening truly lead to good reading? Devine (1978) cited three distinct similarities between listening and reading. Both produce messages and require intake, both are mental processes which can be measured, and both are a complexity of related skills such as recognizing supportive examples and identifying inferences.

Sticht and James (1984) defined three commonalities between spoken and written language. First, oral language skills surface before the development of written communication. Second, speech and writing share the same vocabulary and grammar. Third, children utilize prior knowledge of spoken language when learning how to decipher written words. Therefore, reading success builds upon the early development of oral language mastery. Listening is paramount in this mastery.

From a psycholinguistic approach, Goodman and Goodman (cited in Slicht & James, 1984) stated an interesting theory:

> Written language development draws on competence in oral language, since both written and oral language share underlying structures and since, for most learners, oral language competence reaches a high level earlier. As children become literate, the two systems become interactive, and children use each to support the other when they need to. (p. 294)

Just as researchers agree developed listening skills are a necessary tool for children, literature cites both the need and the success of cooperative learning lessons for generating listening skills within the classroom setting. Bellanca and Fogarty (1991) asserted, "No other instructional method used today can claim the quantity or quality of research highlighting its success" (p. 241). In short, cooperative learning can be utilized at any grade level in any subject matter to aid in listening instruction.

In historical terms, cooperative learning dates back to the beginning of the human race; working together has allowed the human species to survive. Positive interdependence, personal face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, and evaluating a team and its success are the basic elements of the most primitive and the most advanced forms of cooperative learning (Johnson et al., 1988).

While a focused goal of any lesson is acquisition of knowledge, cooperative learning directly incorporates social skills instruction and listening within the curriculum. Cooperative learning addresses both academic achievement and the development of social interaction and its constructive

patterns. Students need to be taught strategies for acceptable social interaction among their diverse classmates. Teamwork and trust building eliminates the competitive nature of peers, especially at the middle school level (Schniedewind & Davidson, 1987).

According to Slavin (1995), cooperative learning is a successful teaching method since students will be flexible and do whatever is necessary for the team and its success. In a cooperative classroom, the students who improve achievement improve status within the classroom, whereas these same achievers lose status in the traditional competitive setting. Slavin (1995) asserted , "Clearly, cooperative goals create pro academic norms among students, and pro academic norms have important effects on student achievement." (p. 17)

Implementing cooperative learning in the middle grades can be successful due to the social nature of adolescents. These pre-teenagers display extreme interest in socialization; however, this drive can be productive in the academic setting when properly channeled. Curriculum objectives can be met while incorporating social skills instruction focusing on leadership, teamwork, and self-concept (Lounsbury, 1991).

Moreover, social and listening skills are necessary for the collaboration within small groups. Johnson and Johnson (1993) asserted the skills of decision-making, trust building, and conflict management must be purposefully included in the engineering of cooperative learning objectives. These skills are needed in the unpredictable years of adolescence.

Thelan, Joyce, and Weil (cited in Alexander & George, 1981) investigated a six step process for team learning: students confront a problem, react to the problem, develop a problem statement, organize to resolve the

problem, report results, and evaluate the solution to the problem. The teacher becomes a facilitator during the interaction among students and the learning process.

Once the cooperative classroom is designed, students will learn to care about classmates (Dishon & Wilson O'Leary, 1984) and a bridge will link the distances among heterogeneous peers. Cooperative learning is synergistic as it fosters equality and acceptance (Schniedewind & Davidson, 1987).

Finally, research illustrates the successes of cooperative learning and its promotion of higher achievement. Rottier and Ogan (1991) proposed five benefits of this teaching method: cooperative learning develops reasoning strategies, promotes positive interpersonal relations among students, fosters positive attitudes toward the curriculum, and elevates higher self-esteem. If these issues are addressed in the middle school grades, the social skill of listening would definitely be positively affected.

Sharan (cited in Slavin, 1995) concluded high, average, and low achievers within cooperative learning settings benefited equally in comparison to peers in control groups. The implementation of social skill and listening instruction benefits all children from the cognitively challenged to the gifted.

After extensive reading and reviewing of current literature, this action researcher chose two possible solutions for improving deficient listening skills among the targeted seventh graders. The targeted students will receive explicit active listening lessons with an emphasis on social skills instruction within the cooperative learning environment.

Project Outcomes and Solution Components

As a result of additional emphasis on social skills instruction, during the period of September 1995 through January 1996, the targeted seventh grade class will increase positive social interaction and active listening skills as measured by teacher and student authentic assessments , student surveys, and dyad checklists.

In order to accomplish the terminal objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Students will work in cooperative groups.
2. specific social skills will be taught throughout the 18 week intervention.
3. explicit active listening lessons will be covered on a weekly basis.
4. visual aids and bulletin boards in the classroom will promote active listening strategies.

Action Plan for the Intervention

I. Cooperative learning strategies will be implemented during semester one of the 1995-1996 school year.
   A. Children will be separated into base groups. Base groups are long term and stay intact for the duration of a study.
      1. Groups will be teacher constructed.
         a. Each group will be composed of three students.
         b. Base groups will stay intact for the duration of the study.

2. Groups will be heterogeneous.
    a. Base groups will be multicultural.
    b. Gender will be balanced in each group.
    c. Each group will have a blend of diverse academic achievement among students
B. Children will work in teacher constructed task groups on a weekly basis. Task groups vary on a weekly basis dependent upon the task on hand.
    1. Group members and their roles will vary from assignment to assignment.
    2. Assignments will include cooperative creative writing, peer tutoring, flashcards, worksheets, and puzzles.

II. Specific social skills will be taught throughout the 18 week intervention.
A. Trust building will become the focus of initial lessons stressing teamwork within the base groups.
    1. Group members will develop a team name and mascot.
    2. Base groups will complete team posters.
    3. Base groups will design and produce team pennants for display within the classroom.
    4. Students will complete team collage posters illustrating personalities and group bonding.
B. Explicit active listening lessons will be taught to task groups on a weekly basis from September 1995 through January 1996.

1. Students will complete listening surveys in September and January. (Appendix A)
2. Students will be observed prior to intervention utilizing dyad checklist. (Appendix B)
3. Various lessons will be presented in lecture form.
    a. Comm[illegible]'s various types of listening (1974) will be c[illegible]ed. (Appendix C)
    b. T-charts will be completed through whole group discussion regarding active listening.
4. Various lessons will be taught through cooperative learning groups.
    a. Bellanca and Fogarty's (1988) Listening Post will be implemented . (Appendix D)
    b. "Are You Really Listening?" (Devine, 1982) will serve as a consciousness-raising device. (Appendix E)
    c. Students will converse, discuss, and debate in teacher constructed dyads in reading class.
        1.) Dyads will be pretested in September observing listening skills while checklist is implemented.
        2.) Dyads will be reassessed in January utilizing the same checklist, which may show signs of post-intervention growth.

d. Students will process at the end of various lessons utilizing the "Please Listen to Me" rubric. (Appendix F)

III. Visual aids and bulletin boards in the targeted seventh grade classroom will promote active listening strategies and cooperative learning techniques.

A. Team names and pennants will be displayed.

B. People posters will be visible.

C. Each month one base group will create a bulletin board design which illustrates active listening indicators.

1. Bulletin board designs will express group creativity.

2. Boards will be photographed for class scrapbook.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, the instructor will complete Active Listening Checklists of Student Dyads to determine pretest and posttest scores. Student surveys will be completed in September 1995 and January 1996 for self-assessment of listening habits and attitudes. Cooperative groups will process strengths and weaknesses of task completion, and rubrics will be completed by students and instructor. Finally, these rubrics will include student created t-charts of various explicit lessons covering social skill mastery and listening aptitude.

Chapter 4

# PROJECT RESULTS

## Historical Description of Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase students' active listening skills in the language arts classroom setting. The implementation of explicit listening lessons coupled with a cooperative learning setting were chosen to effect the desired improvement.

The targeted seventh graders were placed in teacher constructed base groups in September 1995. There were a total of six groups, and each group contained three students. According to the action plan, students were placed into groups according to cultural background, gender, and academic achievement. This separation was to foster diversity. A deviation from the action plan occurred when the researcher needed to separate children according to behavior problems among peers.

The children worked together in their base groups on classroom projects such as flashcard practice on vocabulary words, word search puzzles, and comprehension worksheets. Roles were always teacher chosen and rotated among group members: leader, recorder, materials manager. Task groups were not used as planned in chapter three for two reasons. First, productive

base groups were difficult to formulate considering gender, academic ability, culture, and behavior. Second, the students seemed to bond and thrive in the base group setting, and this researcher did not want to deviate from the structure and impose unpredictability by mixing up the students on a weekly basis.

Trust building activities occupied the month of September. The base groups developed team names and mascots. Some groups elected a slogan rather than a mascot. Students worked on the social skills of coming to consensus and six inch voices during this activity. Next, the cooperative groups designed and illustrated team posters. These were laminated and displayed in the room for the duration of the study. Team pennants were omitted from the action plan since once trust building projects were underway, the researcher concluded pennants were a redundant exercise following team posters.

The second trust building activity was the cooperative group people collage. Students worked within base groups and paged through outdated magazines. Using scissors, each child cut pictures and words which were indicative of some aspect of their personality or life. Next, the three students in each group combined their pictures and words together to form a group, not individual, collage. The students blended together the various symbols of their personalities and glued the magazine cutouts onto the poster. Posters were then laminated and displayed in class.

Students completed student surveys during September, and children were observed and rated on the teacher constructed dyad checklist. Listening lessons were not begun until the month of October. Time restraints and

curricular demands did not permit this researcher to begin implemectation at an earlier date. To compensate for this delay, the action plan was then extended for one month.

Various lessons were presented in lecture form covering Connelly's five types of listening. A sample lesson can be found in Appendix C. Students were actively involved during the three lectures while taking notes from the chalkboard and participating in class discussions. T-charts were designed and students completed personal charts illustrating their understanding of the five types of listening (Appendix G). Students were required to visualize and discuss the appropriate body language during active listening. T-charts were also made displaying the visual and auditory attributes of both polite listening and active listening.

The "Listening Post" activity sensitized students to the body language and behaviors which send messages to speakers (Appendix D). Devine's "Are You Really Listening?" lesson raised the students' consciousness while putting listening skills to active use (Appendix E). Finally, post class processing included rubrics and graphic organizers which required students to evaluate personal and group listening skills.

The listening and cooperative learning themes were displayed through various visual aids: t-charts, team posters, group collages, bulletin boards. Students worked in groups to produce these artifacts for the active listening bulletin boards. These visual aids provided subtle reminders to students to check and monitor their listening habits and body language during group work and direct instruction during teacher lectures.

## Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to access the effects of explicit listening lessons coupled with cooperative learning, student survey responses from the fall of 1995 and spring of 1996 are presented in tables 2, 3, and 4.

Table 2

Describe How a Good Listener Pays Attention and Behaves

| Fall 1995 | Spring 1996 |
|---|---|
| 10 behaves quietly | 11 makes eye contact |
| 8 makes eye contact | 8 sits quietly |
| 4 asks and answers questions | 3 nods head |
| 3 makes sure of understanding | 3 asks and answers questions |
| 2 hears carefully | 2 takes notes |
| 1 follows directions | |
| 1 tries not to be disturbed | |
| 1 folds hands | |
| 1 takes notes | |
| 1 nods head | |

Table 3

Describe How a Poor Listener Pays Attention and Behaves

| Fall 1995 | Spring 1996 |
|---|---|
| 5 no eye contact | 9 no eye contact |
| 4 rude behavior | 8 rude behavior |
| 4 distracted | 3 distracted |
| 4 talks inappropriately | 2 moving around |
| 2 cannot answer questions | 2 head down |
| 1 head down on desk | 2 daydreaming |
| 1 hands not folded | |
| 1 interrupts speaker | |
| 1 tapping pencil | |
| 1 reading something else | |
| 1 does not follow directions | |
| 1 does not understand | |
| | |

Table 4

Describe How You Know That You Have Been Heard and Understood

| Fall 1995 | Spring 1996 |
|---|---|
| 8 person talks back | 8 asks questions |
| 5 asks questions | 4 eye contact |
| 5 looks at me | 3 nods head |
| 1 does not squirm | 2 everyone understands |
| 1 sits still | |
| 1 claps | |
| 1 nods head | |
| 1 repeats what is said | |
| 1 follows directions | |
| | |

When students were asked to rate themselves as listeners, the fall of 1995 produced an average score of 4.0. Yet in the spring of 1996, the students ranked themselves collectively at 3.4.

An analysis and comparison of the student survey data show more focused definitions of good and poor listeners from the fall to the spring. More common student generated answers were evident in the spring with 15 different

responses, whereas the fall survey prompted 31 varied definitions for the first 3 questions. Students demonstrated a transfer of learning from the active listening lessons covered in the action plan. Key words such as eye contact and head nodding appeared across the board. All students were capable of supplying at least one attribute of good listening.

Furthermore, question four of the student survey requested students to rank their listening ability on a scale of 1 to 5, that is from low to high. Before the intervention, students averaged a self-assessment score of four, but they became tougher evaluators come the spring. The post intervention average was 3.4, that is 0.6 lower than the fall score. It appears that students better understood the elements of good listening after the intervention; therefore, the class could better rank themselves with a more astute objectivity. Once they could truly define listening, they were hesitant to claim these skills as their own.

Next, a teacher checklist was used to observe and document student listening and behavior in dyad settings (Appendix B). Students were rated on a scale of 1 to 5, that is from low to high. Class averages from fall 1995 and spring 1996 are presented in table 5.

Table 5

Dyad Checklist Results

| Listening skill | Fall 1995 | Spring 1996 |
|---|---|---|
| nodding head | 2.1 | 4.1 |
| eye contact | 2.6 | 3.3 |
| approp. body lang. | 2.3 | 4.1 |
| ask clarifying quest. | 1.3 | 1.8 |
| paraphrasing | 1.1 | 1.3 |
| | | |

An analysis of data suggests strides in all five areas, especially head nodding and appropriate body language. Even though students were able to define eye contact as an element of good listening, fewer than expected students were capable of demonstrating the eye contact skill within dyads. More practice is needed in this area for application to transfer the students' knowledge to the students' performance. For example, teacher games may foster transfer.

Students made the least gains in asking clarifying questions and paraphrasing. These upper level skills were covered superficially in listening lessons; however, if the intervention were to be extended, improvement would most likely be more evident. This researcher suggests teaching good interviewing techniques as an avenue to successfully incorporate clarifying questions and paraphrasing.

Collectively, an average gain of 1.06 points was demonstrated in all five areas during the one semester action: nodding head +2.0, eye contact +0.7, appropriate body language + 1.8, asking clarifying questions +0.5, and paraphrasing +0.3. This researcher believes even greater gains would be seen if the intervention were continued for the full duration of one school year. Hopefully listening lessons coupled with the cooperative learning will extend beyond the research parameters and become a critical portion of the language arts curriculum from year to year.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on listening skills coupled with cooperative learning, the students displayed marked improvement within the language arts classroom setting. The children exhibited a greater awareness of active listening and its elements, and these skills transferred to both teacher lectures and base group performance. This elevated consciousness of good listening techniques was evident during both class discussions and student dyads.

Furthermore, it appears the students used metacognition to monitor and check their personal listening skills. The students were required to think about and evaluate their listening skills on rubrics and surveys (Appendix F). This may have been the first time some students actually assessed themselves as listeners.

This researcher recommends the implementation of listening lessons coupled with cooperative learning in the language arts setting. Listening lessons should be presented on a weekly basis and reinforced and practiced in a variety of tasks within groups.

Modifications are also recommended in the action plan. Listening lessons would be first implemented in the primary grades and reinforced and continued at the middle school grades. Also, listening lessons would be taught within curricular content in all subject matters. Listening is not a language arts skill; it is a life skill. The action plan requires careful, concise scheduling; time restraints and an already compact curriculum could cause problems with time management. These problems could be averted if teachers work in teams as part of a support system.

Finally, listening lessons should be presented on a year round, continuous basis since one semester allows for only an introduction to listening and its numerous facets. Astute listening skills are a product of ongoing instruction through repeated practice to reach mastery. More emphasis needs to be made in the higher level skills of asking clarifying questions and paraphrasing. These two skills could be presented during semester two of an extended action plan. This could be accomplished by incorporating more lessons.

The targeted seventh graders in this language arts class learned and transferred various attributes of active listening to the classroom setting. A greater awareness was sparked among students, and this self-discovery lays the groundwork for more practice and success in listening. This researcher hopes the students will apply their new knowledge to their lives as they recognize and appreciate the importance of astute listening skills.

In conclusion, this researcher was positively affected by the action plan implementation. A greater appreciation for listening and its vital importance was gained. This was made possible through a greater access to recent literature and research. Finally, portions of the action plan will definitely be repeated to foster better listening with all students within this researcher's classroom.

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# APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Active Listening Student Survey Questions

Date:_____

1. Describe how a good listener pays attention and behaves.

2. Describe how a poor listener pays attention and behaves.

3. Describe how you know that you have been heard and understood during a a conversation.

4. Rate yourself as a listener. Circle one number:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| poor | | average | | excellent |

## APPENDIX B

### Active Listening Checklist of Student Dyad

Date _____

Indicators

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nodding head | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Eye contact | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Appropriate body language | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Asking clarifying questions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Paraphrasing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Participant B

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nodding head | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Eye contact | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Appropriate body language | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Asking clarifying questions | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Paraphrasing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

APPENDIX C

Connelly's Five Types of Listening Lesson Plan

Goal: Students will comprehend the five types of listening according to Connelly with at least 74% accuracy.

Activities: The students will copy notes on five types of listening from chalkboard: polite or conversational listening, passive listening,half-listening, active listening, critical or evaluative listening.

The students will participate in class discussion while generating examples of each type of listening.

The students will practice active listening skills during class discussion.

Assessment: The students will independently complete Connelly's Five types of Listening Process Chart.

APPENDIX D

"Listening Post" Lesson Plan

Goal: Students will participate in dyad conversations as a conscious-raising activity regarding active listening skills and body language.

Activities: Students will be placed in teacher constructed dyads.

One student in each dyad will speak for approximately two minutes on a given topic. The second student will practice active listening.

Roles will be reversed for part two of the dyad conversation.

Assessment: Each student will independently complete "Please Listen to Me" process sheet.

## APPENDIX E

## "Are You Really Listening?" Activity

### Story Script

In November, 1922, two archeologists, Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon, discovered beneath some workmen's huts a stone step that would lead them to one of the great moments in all scientific investigation. Three weeks of patient digging led them down a flight of sixteen steps to the entrance to a tomb of one of Egypt's ancient pharaohs. There in the Valley of the Kings, they found the lost tomb of Tut, the richest tomb in all Egypt. Beneath the rubble-filled passage they found a door bearing the ancient royal seal. With trembling hands, Carter made a small hole in the upper left-hand corner. He lit candles to see if there were any poisonous gases and then, slowly, enlarged the hole. There, after centuries, was the magnificence of the long-lost pharaoh's tomb: golden chairs, a diamond-encrusted throne, gold vases, two great statues, and hundreds of priceless jewels. However, nowhere could he or his friends see a sarcophagus or mummy. Could this be the real tomb? they wondered.

In the next days they searched carefully throughout the chamber. Eventually, they located in a rear corner what appeared to be another door. They eased this open and found themselves in another chamber, seventeen feet long, eleven feet wide, and nine feet high. Here between two enormous statues of solid gold, they found Tut, the eighteen-year-old "boy king". The mummy was in a gold coffin placed within a wooden coffin within a third, golden coffin. It was surrounded by buried food, furniture, dishes, clothing, games, and other everyday objects of the king's court. The two archeologists knew that the people of that time believed the spirit of the dead would awaken and require the ordinary materials of daily life. Here they found not only great wealth but a record of the customs and needs of an ancient people. The chamber walls were

covered with pictures depicting the life of the royal court. There were scenes of battles and the hunt all done in brilliant colors and with perfection of detail. They found, too, curious pieces of furniture, showing lions, crocodiles, and other African animals. Carter and Lord Carnarvon realized that they had unveiled a record of Egyptian life never seen before.

Before the year was over, they had loaded thirty-four packing cases of priceless material from the tomb along with four chariots and dozens of statues. These were loaded on flatcars and carried on a small railroad to the Nile River, where they could be placed on boats for the journey to Cairo. The mummy of the eighteen-year-old king was carried in its separate casing with its 143 pieces of jewelry. Carter filled thirty-three pages of his notebook with a list of the tomb's contents.

Today, historians know more about ancient Egypt because of this discovery, and people from all over the world may come to Cairo to see the splendors of King Tut and his times.

The answers for "Are You Really Listening"?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. 1922 | 6. second | 11. pictures |
| 2. November | 7. 18 | 12. 34 |
| 3. 16 | 8. 3 | 13. 4 |
| 4. rubble | 9. 9 feet | 14. Iran |
| 5. Tut | 10. furniture | 15. 143 |

## "Are You Really Listening" Student Response Sheet

1. In what year was the ancient Egyptian tomb discovered?
   ___1903
   ___1922
   ___1949
   ___1960
2. In what month was it made?
   ___January
   ___June
   ___November
   ___December
3. How many steps did the archeologists dig down?
   ___10
   ___12
   ___16
   ___22
9. How tall was his burial chamber?
   ___9 feet
   ___11 feet
   ___17 feet
   ___10 yards
10. What did they find in the chamber beside the coffin?
    ___grave robbers
    ___other pharaohs
    ___live animals
    ___furniture
11. What were on the walls?
    ___rugs
    ___mirrors
    ___pictures
    ___air vents

4. What was the passage filled with?
___rubble
___gases
___statues
___jewelry

5. Who was buried in the tomb?
___Lord Carnarvon
___Cairo
___Tut
___Carter

6. In which chamber did they find the pharaoh's remains?
___first
___second
___third

7. How old was the pharaoh when he died?
___10
___12
___18
___22

8. How many coffins was he buried in?
___1
___2
___3
___4

12. How many packing cases were sent back from the grave?
___31
___34
___41
___44

13. How many chariots were sent back?
___1
___2
___3
___4

14. How were the discoveries taken to the Nile River?
___train
___truck
___boat
___mules

15. How many pieces of jewelry were found with the mummy?
___100
___123
___143
___193

APPENDIX F

"Please Listen to Me" Rubric

1. How well did I listen to others in my group?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

I wasn't listening at all — Sometimes I listened — I listened very carefully to others

I let others know I was listening by...

I could have been a better listener by...

2. How well was I listened to by others in my group?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

I wasn't listened to at all — Sometimes I was listened to — My ideas were carefully listened to

Someone made me feel listened to by...

Someone made me feel I wasn't listened to because they...

## APPENDIX G

### Connelly's Five Types of Listening Process Sheet

Name_____

| Type | Definition | Situation | Cues |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. polite | | | |
| 2. passive | | | |
| 3. half-listening | | | |
| 4. active | | | |
| 5. critical | | | |